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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: MFA ON POSSIBILITY OF REGIME CHANGE IN GEORGIA

REF: MOSCOW 1153

Classified By: POL M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. MFA Georgia section head Dmitriy Shtodin told us that the GOR would use the prospect of renewed diplomatic relations as a means of encouraging the Georgian people to replace Georgian President Saakashvili, but denied that Russia supported the Georgian opposition's protests or the May 5 mutiny. Shtodin pointed to President Medvedev's May 8 address to Georgian veterans as an example for Moscow's strategy. However, Shtodin conceded that Russia did not see any pro-Russia candidate in the weak opposition to replace Saakashvili, and saw little chance for an imminent regime change in Georgia. Cooperation with the Georgian interest section of the Swiss embassy was smooth but slow, and trade had similarly taken a blow since the August war. End Summary

Encouraging internal regime change

¶2. (C) Newly appointed MFA Georgia section head Dmitriy Shtodin told us May 8 that the GOR would use the prospect of reestablishment of relations with Russia as a means of encouraging the Georgian people to replace "Russiaphobe" President Saakashvili, as Russia continued to consider Georgia as part of its "zone of privileged interests." Shtodin ruled out that Russia supported the Georgian opposition's protests that began April 9, or that the GOR was involved in the tank battalion's mutiny May 5.

¶3. (C) As an example for Moscow's outreach to the Georgian people, Shtodin pointed to President Medvedev's May 8 address to Georgian veterans, in which the President praised Russia and Georgia's "joint struggle" against Nazism as one of the "most memorable and heroic" instances of "Russian-Georgian friendship." Shtodin added that while the GOR abided by Medvedev's categorical refusal to talk to Saakashvili or the GOG, Russia continued to maintain close cultural and social ties to Georgian civil society, including NGOs. He highlighted the Russian Orthodox Church's decision not to recognize the South Ossetian Orthodox Church, but instead maintain its recognition of the Georgian Orthodox Church's authority over the South Ossetian faithful, as another example of this policy.

¶4. (C) Shtodin admitted that Russia did not see any likely candidates in the opposition to replace Georgian President Saakashvili. He conceded the Georgian opposition's hard-line positions toward Russia, although he allowed that Nino Burjanadze, leader of the Democratic Movement-United Georgia, was a "reasonable" politician. In response to our support for Saakashvili as the elected leader of Georgia, Shtodin noted that Russia was "realistic" that the chances for a regime change in Georgia were slim in the near future.

Little interaction with interest section

¶5. (C) Shtodin said that daily business with the Georgian interest section of the Swiss embassy was going smoothly, but lamented that the bulk of his section's work consisted of responding to other agencies' inquiries about Georgian nationals apprehended in Russia on suspicion of crime, rather than liaising with the interest section.

Trade suffered

¶6. (C) Shtodin said that business and trade remained victims of the August 2008 war. Although USD 600 million in bilateral trade and financial flows remained, of which one-third were remittances from Georgian guest workers in Russia back to Georgia, Russia had banned several signature imports to Russia such as water and wine, along with other agricultural goods. Shtodin maintained that Russian consumers had easily found substitutes for these goods, although he conceded that Georgian water and wine were very popular in Russia, and were still being smuggled into the country.
RUBIN